

Pastor's Pen: Getting Serious

This column is hard to write without going full blown doom and gloom. That will not serve us well. That said, we are in a crisis in this country when it comes to clergy. We do not have the clergy we need in so many ways. We don't have the numbers. We don't have the consistent quality. To the reader: things are about to get serious now.

The predicament we are in as a Church is a long time coming. I am not speaking just about the ongoing scandal, nor just about the vocation crisis, but of what got us here. I maintain that both stem from a problem that is widespread within the Church as a whole: a loss of authentic identity. I have oft said that it is a dangerous thing for a person to compartmentalize their lives into areas where their Catholic faith plays and doesn't play. It leads to a spiritual schizophrenia. What is true in the person is also true of a corporate body. When we start to chase our Catholic identity out of areas of our lives, it will be to make way for a worldly identity.

There are many good priests out there who faithfully serve God and His people. There are also predators masquerading as priests. There are those who neglect their flocks, who are abusive in their anger, who either don't provide true nourishment or feed their flocks the poison of heresy. What we need is much more of the first group and none of the latter group.

So how do we do that? That's the six million dollar question.

Same base, different structure

It starts with what we see in a young man as worthy of consideration for Holy Orders. It starts in the family and parish. There is old saying that you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. Too often, if we see a young man who has his act together and shows qualities that make for a good husband and dad, we automatically think he should be married and in the lay state (among the laity). This is a mistake on several levels.

First, any man who would be a good priest would also display the kind of single-heartedness and fidelity for Christ and His Church that a good husband would have for his wife. If we look at a young man and fear he wouldn't make a good husband and think, "Oh, maybe he should be a priest," then we get the kind of priest we recruit. It is not the role of the seminary to make him the kind of man who will be a good husband. Ordination is not a magic wand that makes character flaws go away and maturity appear. Neither is the Sacrament of Matrimony for that matter. The seminary is in the business of weeding out immaturity. It nor any responsible diocese has no interest in ordaining men who wouldn't make good husbands. Why? An unfaithful husband will teach his children to not love their mom as they should. His lack of love for his wife will translate to a lack of love for their mother. A priest with this same flaw will not teach his flock to love Christ and His Church; he will teach them to love him. He will do this by remaining silent in the face of sin, downplaying sin, or encouraging sinful behavior. He will teach his flock to be every bit as abusive as he is.

You want a man who will be faithful. It should be one of the criteria we look for in our future priests. We need that fidelity. Just as a good husband teaches his children how to love their mother, so a good priest should teach his flock to love Christ and His Church.

Second, any man who would not make a good dad will not make a good priest. Period. In fact, so much of the current scandals create in us the visceral response we would have on hearing about a dad who has molested his children. It should. It is the same level of betrayal. So much of the role of a pastor in a parish is identical to the role of a dad in a family. The priest is supposed to provide for and protect his flock. He is to be diligent about what they are exposed to. He is supposed to be the spiritual head of home. A good dad is not concerned with his children always liking him. He knows if he does his calling correctly, there will be times his children are angry with him. A good priest doesn't seek to be popular, but to do what is right even when doing so makes him unpopular.

You want a man who will provide and protect. You want a man who will use his capabilities to the good of his family or flock. You want a man who your sons can look up to and your daughters can fully trust. You want a man who will teach his children to love their mother. If a young man shows no promise of these traits, the absolute last place they should be is a seminary!

We Need to Seek, Promote, and Nurture.

Neither the priesthood nor the seminary is the land of misfit boys. We get out of it what we put into it. We want a better result, we need better ingredients. We cannot complain about not getting the men we need in priests if we don't send those types of men. We have seen the horrific damage done by priests who would have also been horrible dads and husbands. Given the task that lays ahead for the Church in this country, the Roman Catholic priesthood cannot a dumping ground for the effeminate, the socially awkward, or those who would not make good husbands and dads.

We need men. Manly men. Men who will be courageous. Men who will be selfless. Men who are willing to endure whatever sacrifice and suffering might be entailed in the protection and provision of their beloved. We need men who will be faithful. We need steady hands at the sterns of our parishes and dioceses.

SS. Peter and Paul has not had a priest come from its numbers in decades. St. Joseph in Fayette has yet to have one of its own be ordained. Neither parish has been or is currently without young men who make or would make good husbands and dads. Hence, neither parish is without young men who would make excellent priests.

I believe the crisis we face, be it of numbers or quality, can be lifted. It will require us to get serious about our future. We need to start looking, recruiting, asking, and nurturing the kind of priests we need. We should come to place where when a young man is asked he doesn't think people see him as a misfit, but as the kind of man they would trust to become the kind of man they would want to marry their daughter and be a dad to their grandchildren. The truth is: if he would not be good in those roles, he will not be a good priest either.